Transcription: Leo Borel

Today is Wednesday, July 7th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree, and I'll be interviewing Mr. Leo Borel. This interview is being done in person at the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas, and it's being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to come and chat today. It's an honor for me and for all of us here at the Land Office to have you here. The first question sir is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the service.

Leo Borel: Well, let's put it this way, I was a breach baby, and my dad worked for the Port Arthur fire department.

Were you born in Port Arthur?

Leo Borel: I was born and raised in Port Arthur. I was there until I got a little place called drafted and so from there, from Port Arthur it was December 29th, 1942 I went to a little place called Fort Sam Houston. From there they sent me to a little place called Fort Knox, Kentucky.

To back up a little bit, sir, I guess then you were in high school when Pearl Harbor was bombed? Do you remember that day? Can you tell us a little bit about your memories from that day?

Leo Borel: Yeah, when I got my notice it was the 10th of December, 1942, and I was still 18 years old. So I went home for dinner, because I only stayed about four blocks from the school. I went home for dinner, seen my notice down there, went back to school and told the teacher I got my notice to be drafted, and she told me to go back home and enjoy my stay at home until I left.

To go back a little further though, on December 7th, when Pearl Harbor bombed, I guess you were still in high school. Do you remember that day, hearing it on the radio or learning about it?

Leo Borel: Well, I heard it on the radio and like everything else, just being in high school I didn't know if when and where.

So you didn't think for sure then that you would be going to war yourself.

Leo Borel: Oh yeah, I thought I'd be going, but I didn't know when.

So about a year later then is when you got drafted, and from the time you got your draft notice, how long was it before you were on your way to Fort Sam Houston?

Leo Borel: Time I got the draft notice, I got it on the 10th of December, and left on the 29th of December.

So about three weeks or so.

Leo Borel: About 2-1/2 weeks.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Leo Borel: I had a brother. He was much younger.

So he wasn't even close to being old enough to go in yet.

Leo Borel: No, he just got close enough for Korea. Then he got used over in Japan when Korea started.

What were your parents' thoughts about you being drafted? Were they worried for you? Were they proud?

Leo Borel: Well, they probably was, but they didn't show it. Dad was working at that time, he was working for a shipyard building ships in Orange, Texas. So he just had from the fire department he went to Texas Company Refineries, and from Texas Company Refineries he went into the shipyard. So he made, they lived there, down there, because he was old enough where he didn't have to go, but he still would right on the borderline, so it was being the shipyards down there, they kept deferring him completely.

So you had one younger brother. Did you have any sisters?

Leo Borel: No sisters, just a brother.

Tell us then what you were thinking or feeling when you finally left to go to boot camp. Were you scared? Were you excited?

Leo Borel: No, I'm pretty calm all the way, just thinking about just go and try to do what I can do and come back.

What was boot camp like?

Leo Borel: Kind of rough because my boot camp down there, sent me to Fort Knox and I was supposed to take my training in tanks, being short and only weighed about 100 pounds. So I took all my training in tanks – medium tanks, light tanks, and no infantry training whatsoever. Never even knew what the infantry was.

Really. How long were you at Fort Sam Houston then?

Leo Borel: I think about 10 days.

Oh, that was it? So just the processing and then they sent you right to Fort Knox.

Leo Borel: What kept me there so long down there, they had to get all my clothes because I was too small, and they couldn't have anything that fit me.

So describe to us what Fort Knox was like.

Leo Borel: Well, it was real nice. Hilly, a lot of trees an cross creeks and things. But being small, I deal with it pretty well, adjusted to all kind of weather and everything, and all kind of weather to do and being from Port Arthur, the weather can change from one time or another, you never know.

Was that the first time you'd been away from home when you went into the service?

Leo Borel: Well, yeah, pretty much so.

So they sent you by train then?

Leo Borel: They took me a bus from San Antonio to Fort Sam, and then some trains from Fort Sam to Fort Knox.

Describe for us a little bit what that train ride was like. Did it take a couple of days? Did you have any freedom on there?

Leo Borel: It took us about four days, and they used the whole train down there. They would take us down there for meals in the dining car and everything else, or let us go out for stretching our legs for a couple of hours. But we always had to be pulled off the road from passenger trains. We pulled off the road for cargo, for ammunition trains and everything.

That's why it took four days then. You were always going off on sidings waiting for other trains.

Leo Borel: So it took us quite a bit of time to go there.

How did it come about that you were put in with tanks? You mentioned your size, but was it something you volunteered and wanted to do?

Leo Borel: No, it was something they just, being short and small, it would be easy to get down in the turret where the driver is because you only had a place about this big around, about like that to get in, and a small place down there. So it was easy for me to crawl in there and get in the driver seat.

Tell us a little bit about the training at Fort Knox.

Leo Borel: Well, training down there, they taught you all of the guns and everything, how to break the gun down, rifle training and everything else, get your wells down there and travel up and down mountains, like training you for down there for walking.

What type of tanks -

Leo Borel: But their tanks down there, ___ German, medium tanks. Then after that we got several weeks of training on that, and learned how to drive it, clean 'em and everything else, operate 'em. Even learned how to shoot the75mm cannon on there. Then they put you through called the light tanks and they had a 37mm gun, and we took our training in that.

Did you train with the same crew the entire time or did they move you around?

Leo Borel: Like about 80 to 100 men in our platoon down there and we'd all get to be together down there and they would maybe have about 15-20 tanks, and we'd all be 4 or 5 down there, run down there for about an hour, two hours training on each tank, each one of us, learned to drive them and everything.

Did you learn every position in the tank?

Leo Borel: Except the commander. Just like working a bulldozer.

What was your favorite part about the training with the tanks? Is there something that stood out that you enjoyed more than anything else?

Leo Borel: Not any particular thing.

What about something you didn't like?

Leo Borel: Cleaning them.

Tell us a little bit about that.

Leo Borel: Well, when you get full of mud on all the tracks and everything down there and then all over the tank down there. You'd get about 4 or 5 inches of mud from top to bottom, and all you got is just a pressure hose and if you couldn't do it with a pressure hose, you had to take a darn shovel or a broom or something to clean it and get all that mud off of it.

So how long all told did you spend in training at Fort Knox?

Leo Borel: I think I spent about 3-1/2 months training there.

A pretty long school then.

Leo Borel: Yeah, because they learned us from tanks, we learned to drive the half tracks, and then 2-1/2 tons, even Jeeps. We learned how to drive all kind of vehicles.

What was the biggest challenge in learning how to actually drive a tank?

Leo Borel: Learn how to shift it while it's still moving before it stops.

What would happen if you didn't get it shifted?

Leo Borel: Well, if you didn't do it, you had to put it back in first gear again and get enough speed on it again to shift into second and high gear, and that thing stopped pretty quick.

How many men were in a typical tank?

Leo Borel: Well, the medium tank down there, 5 men. Then light tanks was 4. You didn't have room too much for an extra man in there. And the medium tank, you had your driver and your assistant driver, then you had your gunner and just a loader, then a tank commander. That's in a medium tank. And the light tanks then you had your driver, and your assistant driver, then you had your gunner and being small shells in there then it wasn't as heavy or anything, and your tank commander was more up looking on the outside the turret down there. He was more like a machine gunner up there.

You had two. What was your favorite position to be in a tank?

Leo Borel: I don't know, probably the gunner.

Why was that?

Leo Borel: Well, you could line up your target down there and we were shooting at a 55-gallon drum over a mile and a half off, and I was pretty well lined up on all of them every time. I used to hit 'em no problem. And that was the easiest thing down there. I didn't have to do all the heavy lifting.

Sure. You mentioned that you were smaller in size and that's why you think you got put in the tanks. Were most of the other men you were with shorter in height as well?

Leo Borel: No, they were bigger and taller. I was usually the shortest man in the outfit. As a matter of fact, I was the shortest man the whole time I was in the service.

I wasn't sure if there was a height limitation.

Leo Borel: Well I'm 5 feet, 5 foot tall.

But I mean in terms of being too tall, is it possible to be too tall to be in the tanks?

Leo Borel: No, they had guys that were 6'6". They were skinny.

I'm trying to visualize how much room was in one of those tanks.

Leo Borel: They were skinny so that's why they were able to get in that turret down there. They usually put them more up like gunner and assistant gunner.

A little more room?

Leo Borel: Yeah, there was a little more room up there.

So you complete the three and a half months of training. Tell us where you go to next after that.

Leo Borel: Well, then we went to like Fort Campbell.

Also in Kentucky?

Leo Borel: Yeah, and only trouble I was supposed to go in there, kind of infantry training, we were supposed to go in what they call live fire, you know, for infantry training, and only problem was, I was only there three days. Then from there they sent me to Camp Euliss, which is now I think Fort Euliss out there in Virginia. When we got there, there was about 500 of us went there, and it used to be a CC camp.

OK, Conservation Corps?

Leo Borel: Yeah, and then we got in there, we had to clean the barracks up, cut all the grass, pick up the leaves, trim tree limbs and everything else, and get 'em all ready. We spent over a month doing that, and then we cleaned all the barracks up and incoming people would come in and they were where we cleaned up. In other words, we did engineer's work down there. When

we weren't doing that, we would go to Fort, I forget it now, anyway, we would go load ships. We'd unload the trains, ammunition on trains, and load the ships up for ammunition for convoy. So we must've had about three or four convoys come in and we worked I think a good 18 hours a day.

How long did that go on for?

Leo Borel: Oh, a month and a half.

So at that point you were just waiting to –

Leo Borel: Ship out.

So they were just putting you to work while you were there. Were you excited and eager to get into the action or did you have any trepidations about it?

Leo Borel: No, I wasn't excited about anything.

Really, you were just pretty calm about the whole thing.

Leo Borel: Going with the flow, going with the flow.

During that time, I assume though you were probably aware of the news and what was going on in the war. What was the mood or the morale amongst most of the men?

Leo Borel: Most of the guys I was with down there, they just wanted to hurry up and get it over with, get where they were going and get it over with and do what they were asked to do. But it wasn't really a big deal.

And did you know at that point that you would be going towards the European Theater?

Leo Borel: Well, at that time, yeah, because they didn't have too much use for tanks in the Far East. So tanks and everything else was more in Europe and North Africa.

So what unit were you with at that point when you shipped out to go to war?

Leo Borel: Well, I don't know exactly the unit, but they shipped us out and then we landed in Casablanca, and when we left the States, I left on what they called a luxury liner. It was on the plaque they had by the captain's steering wheel and everything, they had the USS United States, but everything they told us was they transferred the name to USS America, and so it took us 5 days to go across. We were the only boat with no convoy whatsoever because the speed of the boat, a U-boat couldn't hardly catch us.

Now that luxury liner was just to transport men, personnel. How did your tanks get over there?

Leo Borel: Well, they were on a regular what they called a cargo ship or LST.

So you didn't travel then with the convoy at all.

Leo Borel: No, I was strictly as replacement then.

Sure. So tell us then, you get to Casablanca which is a very well known city from the movies and that sort of thing, what was that like?

Leo Borel: Well we got there and as soon as we got there we unloaded and they seen a French liner down there, and they said one of the battleships put three rounds down in it and they fired from 28 miles out and sunk it right there on the dock, and we had to march. When we got out, we marched right by it and went out to an area down there they had for replacement, and it was about 5 miles, 6 miles outside of Casablanca, which the town at that time wasn't very big. It was only about 2 miles square, small. Then I got down there and they took half of our clothes away from us because we didn't need no overcoat and heavy stuff.

Do you remember roughly the date when this was that you got over there? Sometime in '43 I'm guessing. You said you were drafted in December of '42.

Leo Borel: Let me look here. It was in May, let's see, July 10th I joined the 2nd Armament.

So that's the unit, the Hell on Wheels, right?

Leo Borel: Yeah, OK, I got there around the 24th of June.

24th of June, '43. Tell us then what were your thoughts of North Africa? What are your memories?

Leo Borel: It was dirty, filthy, wind there, hot. We got there, we needed a lot of water to drink. We got there what they called those winds coming from the desert, and it would be about 110 in the shade over there at that time. There was hot wind coming in and it would wind up getting to about 130 degrees, and then nothing but sand blowing. So you don't go very far or work very fast or anything else.

Was it hard to keep the tanks operational in that type of climate?

Leo Borel: Well probably did, because at that time I wasn't sure where I was gonna go. I didn't know if I was going to go to tanks, infantry or what. We just had to replace whatever they needed, so we were training in tanks and we figured we'd be going into tanks.

When you got to 2nd Armored and you were with tanks, was it harder to keep the tanks operational and running well in the desert climate with the sand and the wind than it was back at Fort Knox?

Leo Borel: Well, when I got down there, they put me, I was in the tanks, I went to medium tanks first, and then they found out that my legs were too short, being small. It was easy to get in and out, but then they turned around and put me down there in the medium tanks and I was too short to reach the clutch and everything, push it down far enough to operate it. So what they do, 30 minutes later they put me in light tanks, and same thing happened. I was still too short. Not that I wasn't small enough, but I was just too short. So what they done, they put me in infantry, 41st Armored Infantry, and so I didn't know anything about infantry training whatsoever, and they put me in a motor squad, which was what they called heavy weapons for infantry.

What type of mortars were they? Were they 81mm?

Leo Borel: 81 and 37. One day and night and we headed into Sicily. When I got there, they were making the invasion of Sicily.

OK, tell us about going into Sicily.

Leo Borel: Well, down in Bileta, and first thing I know we got off the boat and I'd been in a half track down there with the motor squad, and they pulled us down there and we went in there and we see a great big mountain, town on top of it. First thing we know, the Germans are firing mortar shells at us. But we were too far for our mortar to reach them, and so we just camped out there.

Was that the first combat you saw?

Leo Borel: That's the first time, artillery shells. I wasn't afraid of the artillery shells, because they were maybe a quarter of a mile from us was the closest they were hitting. They only fired about four or five rounds, and late that night we half tracked and went up there, going up about a 45-degree angle. That's a steep angle going up into that town. We took that town during the night. Later on, we left from there and we started going to different places. To kind of give you an idea -

Yeah, and you're showing us some pictures here from one of your books.

Leo Borel: Now this is a vehicle the Germans had left, and this vehicle we commandeered.

Officer's car.

Leo Borel: And the guys were using it to go back and forth to the beach, about 8 or 10 miles to the beach and they were using it to go back and forth to the beach. General Patton told them to stop using it. He says you'll be using it down there and first thing you know, an airplane will come in down there and take you all out.

That's right, sure.

Leo Borel: So this is like some town, now kind of us going down a hill here.

What were your memories of the German and Italian soldiers? Did you see many of them up close?

Leo Borel: Well, the German soldiers were real, like us, they were fighters. They wouldn't hardly give in. The Italians down there, at that time down there they were pretty well know they were being defeated, and they were giving up as fast as they could. Germans down there, heck, you had to either kill 'em or get 'em where they couldn't operate no more. But most of them Germans down there, if you kill a non-comm or an officer, the rest of them down there, they seemed to be lost.

Without leadership.

Leo Borel: Without leadership. But they were fighters. They would fight you to the devil.

When you were fighting against them, and all of this was going on, did you have a feeling or a sense that the United States was going to win? Did you feel like you were pushing the Germans and Italians back and they were retreating?

Leo Borel: Oh yeah, we were pushing them back all the time. It seemed like we had to defend it against them, but the only trouble, we were able to work better together than them. They seemed like they were disorganized most of the time.

So you were able to keep pushing them out, and you get Sicily. At that point had you had a chance at all to write any letters home?

Leo Borel: Oh, we wrote letters. You could write letters every day. We had what you call free meal.

Sure, were you able to get many letters?

Leo Borel: Yeah, but sometimes it would be two weeks before we would get one. It would take two to three weeks before they would get there. Sometimes our letter would come in and they were talking about something we talked about a month ahead of time. So by the time it got back to us down there, they were already over a month old.

So I imagine your parents back home in Texas were following the events of the war but not knowing ever exactly where you were, just kind of in general maybe. Did they know you were in Africa?

Leo Borel: Oh yeah, they didn't know exactly where we were at. It strictly was APO. But I had several people I knew down there, they had pretty good contact, but recruiting and everything so they knew exactly what their APO was, about where it was and where we were at, and they also knew what outfit. Had one a cousin guy, he was in recruiting, so he kept pretty well informed about what outfit I was in and about where they were located, so they knew just about where I was at. Sometimes it would be a month before they would know anything.

You mentioned a bit ago that the German leadership and how they would lose an officer or a non-comm, what are your memories of your leadership, your platoon commander?

Leo Borel: We lost one down there. It looked like somebody would step up and take over. There were no problems down there who was going to take over.

Do you have any memories of your platoon sergeant or your platoon commander?

Leo Borel: Oh yeah, at the time, I was the only PFC and I was a lot of times they put me out to scout, being small, and put me out to scout down there, so I would report back and first thing you know, heck, they wanted to make me sergeant, and I told them no, let me be where I'm at. I said I'm satisfied where I'm at. But then the captain went down there and he told me, said this is the second time you refused me being sergeant, and you ain't gonna have no choice next time. First thing I know down there, I'm getting in the Battle of the Bulge and he didn't get a chance to get me anything. But this is kind of like part of a place in Sicily. There's supposed to be an airport close by. They got a road right next to this building. We pulled in there taking Palermo, Sicily, and this is going up, kind of like going up to the top of a hill.

Yeah, I can see that in this photo you're showing me.

Leo Borel: We spent the night there and the next morning woke up, and guy went to, had a wate fountain up in there, and he went to pick up some water and there happened to be 500 Italians that moved in there during the night and camped out there right above us, and we didn't know anything or hear anything or nothing.

Wow.

Leo Borel: So they just give up, take the guns and we were just marching to downtown Palermo, down to the military down there, and when we got down there, there were guns, tanks, and everybody was pointing down to him, down there he said wait, wait, wait. So they said that's a bunch of 500 prisoners. Oh, 500 prisoners? Said what's those then in back of you? He didn't know there was 1,000 behind 'em.

Really, just surrendering in mass.

Leo Borel: Just giving up. At that time, the Italians didn't give up. They gave up in Sicily, but within Sicily, but then they gave up about a month or two months after, and so we had over 1,500 Italian prisoners.

Where did you and your unit go after Sicily?

Leo Borel: After Sicily, I'll take a little map here, this is Sicily, and we took boats and come in -

Came back over to Britain?

Leo Borel: Comes almost all the way, just say about 500 miles from the state, went into Britain to down below Scotland there. They put us in there and then they shipped us by train to a little place called Teborg Garrison, which is like West Point to England. So we were around there for that. Here's a map of Sicily, that's going out through Gibraltar, and making a turn to England. Then we went into England and we trained in England in what's called the Salisbury Plains. Salisbury Plains is where we trained for Europe.

What were your memories of the British people? How were they towards you?

Leo Borel: They were kind of reserved. They thought they had the best of everything. They wanted, thought they could do better than anybody else. But they was good, they was well trained and everything, but they thought they knew more than anybody else.

Really. How long did you spend in Britain getting ready?

Leo Borel: Well, we stayed there from, I think, let me see, sometime in I think it was around October, and we were there for the invasion of France, so stayed there almost 9 months training.

In Britain just getting ready? Then were you involved in the Normandy invasion?

Leo Borel: No, we weren't in the Normandy invasion. We were D4. We come there after. They had a great big storm on the 7th or 8th of June, come in and it tore up everything, all the beaches and everything, and we got up here and see this here, this is where we left, and we

crossed the Channel there, so we had to wait the storm out there in the half track out in the rain, wind, cold weather and everything else. The rain was cold because it was coming from the north.

I noticed on the map here the town of Palais. Were you involved in the Palais gap?

Leo Borel: Yeah, we was out in the southern part of it.

What were your memories of that? That's pretty famous.

Leo Borel: I lost a good buddy of mine in that gap there, he was killed.

Where was he from?

Leo Borel: He was from around New York somewhere. He got shot up there. We lost quite a few people. Just to give you an idea of something kind of like what the beach was in the invasion -

Massive ships and equipment, personnel.

Leo Borel: When we landed, there were still bodies floating in the water. They were picking them up.

How did that affect you, or did it, seeing that sort of thing, the effects of war? Did it ever really have an impact on you?

Leo Borel: Not that much. I was just trying to do my job and do what I could. Now Normandy, that's how we were living like there's a hedge row, this would be a little narrow court road, like the view court and wagons up in France, and there would be rows of dirt. You can see right over in this picture here, it's about 8-10 foot wide dirt here, and there's about 6-8 foot high with trees. In Normandy, it's all like in blocks.

Yeah, that's what I've read about.

Leo Borel: And them blocks down there, the Germans would be on one corner down there and they would have a machine gun on each corner over there, so anytime we would start going over, we would be open and they would tear us up. Then whenever the guy got to find out weld railroad ties to a tank, we started cutting through the holes like this here.

Start cutting through the hedge rows?

Leo Borel: Push that dirt through and went straight through. Before, anytime a tank would go up down there, the bottom would be -

Would be vulnerable?

Leo Borel: Harm would be with the ___. See I think it was about ¼" or ½" deal on the bottom, and there's a bazooka and guns could knock them out easy. When they put railroad ties and they went through the hedge row, they weren't able to do any good. It had to take a German 88 or something like that, an artillery shell, to really penetrate and knock them down.

So you were there at the Palais gap, and you pushed on ultimately up to the Battle of the Bulge, which is very famous.

Leo Borel: Well this here, we come out here, this is St. Lo breakthrough, here. And we went into, toward to cut them off at St. Lo breakthrough, and so we come about right up in here. Or St. Lo, after that, we went across toward Brussels and Belgium. Then we were one of the first outfits in Belgium.

Yeah, there's Belgium up here, Waterloo, Brussels.

Leo Borel: Now Patton would come in, he'd come in when we was down in Normandy here and the St. Lo breakthrough, about three days ahead of anybody else. We were all lonesome.

Did you ever see General Patton? Did he ever come talk to your men?

Leo Borel: Yeah, in Sicily he came to us down there when we were going through Sicily going to Palermo, and we got stopped by a German 88 down there in the mountain pass, and he had three tanks shot out down there before we found out where that tank gun was, and he come down there. At that time we had to wear leggings, and my pants legs coming out of my legging and I was redoing my leggings and he come on up there, and I didn't see him come up. When we seen him come up, we all stood at attention, and he looked at me and said keep doing what you're doing. So I went back to doing what I was doing.

Fixing your leggings?

Leo Borel: Yeah, getting it all fitted up, put up together. And from there on, the next time I seen him we was pulling guard duty on a little bridge, and he come in a jeep and pulled rifle inspection on us while we were at this thing there. The sergeant in charge on there, there was a little ditch maybe about 12-14 feet wide, and about 6 foot deep, and it had a little bridge going across it. Sergeant's gun was dirty. He said sergeant, I'll be back in two hours and I want that gun clean. And just about two hours later, almost to the minute, he was back there pulling rifle inspection on that sergeant again to make sure it was clean.

So you were there and saw that. That's pretty neat.

Leo Borel: I didn't see him then, the next time we heard about him having trouble with that soldier -

Yeah, that he slapped…

Leo Borel: Yeah. But a lot of times we had a couple of guys down there that would get that way, slap a guy, and the best thing to do a lot of times down there is they just go crazy. We had one guy down there, heck he was down in France, and he jumped up with the artillery shells coming at us and everything and we'd pin him down. He jumped up down there and started running to the Germans, hollering. So one guy tackled him and next thing we do, some guy slapped him in the face and he was OK.

I mean there's not much else you can do, sure.

Leo Borel: Patton figured oh well heck, he slapped the boy to get his mind on what he was supposed to be doing.

That's right. Well, from all accounts he was a little angry that the guy seemed to be showing cowardice.

Leo Borel: What happened down there, one of the nurses or ward boy saw him do it, and then made a great big thing out of it.

They made a big deal out of it, exactly. I don't think a lot of people blamed Patton.

Leo Borel: Well, he was kind of frustrated, kind of the kid should've been on the line anyway.

Exactly, that's what it was about.

Leo Borel: He was the type down there, he says take care of your gun and everything else. He says I can always get men. That's why they used to call him blood and guts. He said with your blood and my guts down there, we'll get this war won.

Yeah, called him blood and guts, that's right. So tell us then, sir, talk about the Battle of Bulge because that's a very iconic and famous battle in Europe.

Leo Borel: Well, the Battle of the Bulge down there when it first started, it wasn't too bad. They we started to hit, a snow storm hit us, and then we had about 3 foot of snow, and when you start living in snow that's 3 foot deep, eating and sleeping in it, and the temperature dropped from there. I think they said it was the coldest they had in 50 years. It dropped down in the 20s. And so we didn't have any hardly clothes. We just had a light wool uniform and a light coat. All that hit us down there and that's where I got my feet froze down in the Battle of the Bulge. But it was rough.

And then at that point, you were up against some pretty seasoned and aggressive German forces.

Leo Borel: This picture here shows the first tank of the 2nd Armored Division to hit Germany, and these are the men that was in it. I got a bigger picture there. I got a smaller one made here. By the time you talk about the Battle of the Bulge, this is what one of the German tanks done to one of our tanks. They put five holes in one of our light tanks, and there was a fire about a mile, mile and a half, and you can see how accurate the Germans were. This here picture of the map shows what the Germans had planned in the Battle of the Bulge here. Now this second one down here, this little town here is as far as the penetration the Germans made in the Battle of the Bulge and we stopped 'em there. As a matter of fact, we had to take that town three times because the little town right next to it, they would leave it – let's see if I can show it – yeah here.

Yeah, deepest penetration here in battles fought on December 22nd and 23rd, 1944. Or 23rd through 28th, '44.

Leo Borel: That's as far as they got. But I'm gonna show you another little picture here which the Germans would've got to which is only about 5-10 miles. This is a picture of what the Germans was looking for.

OK, just west of – is it pronounced Salais? Was a fuel depot consisting of 400,000 5-gallon cans of gas. This was a target of the Germans. They needed the fuel for their Panzer tanks and we stopped 'em.

Leo Borel: They never did get to there. That's what they was really after. So you see they had pretty good intelligence. They knew exactly where they were going.

When that battle was over, did you have a sense that you had just taken part in a pretty famous fight?

Leo Borel: Well, no, it was just another battle.

Sure, but did you think the Germans seemed more aggressive and more driven in that counteroffensive than they had at any point up until then? I've always read about it as being the Germans' last real pushback.

Leo Borel: That was the last push. If they could've got to where they wanted to go – they were planning on going through here all the way, all up in here. They would've flipped the English and us down there.

Cut you off.

Leo Borel: Yeah. When they had that tank battle in here, which is if you remember the Battle of the Bulge, the movie, well that big tank battle was right up in here. That's where the Germans just ran out of gas because they couldn't get to it. From there on, this is all, drove 'em all the way into Germany, into the Elbe River. That was just like a cakewalk.

That's as far as you went then after the battle was over?

Leo Borel: I just got to the Battle of the Bulge. I was in here, up in this area here.

That's the Rhine River.

Leo Borel: I was right up in here. Then they pulled us out after the Battle of the Bulge.

But after the battle was over, they didn't have you then go into Germany?

Leo Borel: No, I had my feet frozen then and I had to come back to the hospital.

How bad were your feet? Were you afraid at some point you might lose them?

Leo Borel: Well, I thought I was going to lose a couple of the big toes. It was pretty bad. I have a picture in this little booklet, shows you something. My toes was all turned black. And I wore a size 5 shoe at that time, and my feet swoll up about the size of a small cantaloupe, which is about 6 inches around, and no feeling in the bottom and everything. When I went, they took me off the front line, and this is the first stop I had. I seen this picture being taken of this nurse, and I'm in this picture.

You say in your caption here, the man half sitting up looks like me. I was here at this time and place. This was the actual nurse I saw. That's interesting. So they sent you back. Where did they send you on from there? Did you go back to Britain?

Leo Borel: They put me on a train and sent me to Paris. I went from Paris and then we went to Britain then. Then actually I went to Glasgow. And then from Glasgow, Scotland, they sent me to Wales, and I was in Wales about 15 days. Then they put me on a nice little ship they called Queen Mary and sent me back to the States.

So you rode the actual Queen Mary back. Wow.

Leo Borel: I had to be on the right side down to see the Statue of Liberty when we passed by, right at the porthole.

I'm sure that was an emotional moment for you to come back home.

Leo Borel: Oh yeah. When we got unloaded down there, they took me by ambulance through the Lincoln Tunnel to Staten Island. From there I got a chance to call and talk to mom and dad, and they told me I was going to go to Fort Sam Houston to Brook General Hospital. So I told them well, I'll call ya'll from there. Also, too, I had an aunt and uncle living in San Antonio at the time, so most of my time in San Antonio was all visiting with them whenever I could get out, walking up to get out.

You weren't married or dating anyone during the war?

Leo Borel: No. I went in when I was 18 and I got out when I was 21, and I didn't get married until I was 26, I was almost 27.

Sure, so you were back home then in Texas when the war ended in Europe. Do you remember Victory over Europe Day where you were?

Leo Borel: Well, Europe, I didn't get too much excited over it.

Because Japan was still going on.

Leo Borel: We were still leaving men from Europe all the way to Japan, getting ready for that. But I was kind of excited, I was back in the hospital and when I heard about I was supposed to get discharged, then we heard VJ Day.

I imagine that was a celebration.

Leo Borel: Yeah, everybody was doing – I went downtown in San Antonio and almost got mobbed. I said well heck, I ain't gonna stay in no mob, I'm going back in the hospital. I went back to the hospital and went back to the barracks. They put us in Fort Sam but it was under hospital control. So we said uh-oh, we won't be able to get discharged right away. We were thinking not gonna get discharged. They says we'll get you discharged. So I got discharged on August 15th, 1945.

Wow, it wasn't long then. I know at that point they really were ready to downsize quick.

Leo Borel: This here map shows you the area just here, are all the towns the 2nd Armored Division had been in.

That's a lot.

Leo Borel: And the bottom part is right here is all the big towns.

I see that, and then the names of the commanders.

Leo Borel: And all of the commanders. And this is all the regiment, crest and everything on there.

That's a beautiful map.

Leo Borel: And down here, the bottom part down at the bottom line is all the German units that we eliminated. So you can see down there, and a lot of them was what you call SS units. They were supposed to have been the best units.

So you got discharged but then at some point you went into the Air Force.

Leo Borel: Well I got out and about 3-1/2 years and went to college at Lamar University in Beaumont, and then I was doing that and then I decided, passed by the Air Force recruiting office and asked them, said would you take me back in the service? They said yeah, you'll have to waive your disability. I said well I can't do much marching. Said well we'll put in your records you're not, can't march very far. So that's what they done, and so next day after about noon, until well tomorrow morning. I said what time you open? 7 o'clock. I said I'll be here 7 o'clock down there and sign me up.

What year was that?

Leo Borel: That was in '49, April '49.

OK, so before Korea hit and started up.

Leo Borel: Oh yeah. Korea and another place called El Paso, Texas.

Fort Bliss?

Leo Borel: No, not Fort Bliss. Bakes Air Force Base. In the meantime well they sent me to Denver. I was supposed to be a photographer doing photography work. They were loaded in photography and I wound up transferred into what you call turret mechanic for the B-29 and B-50s, and learned how to set them up for the guard for the turret mechanics to shoot the 50 caliber guns, and from there, I went to El Paso, had my training there.

How much time did you spend in Korea?

Leo Borel: Korea? No time.

No time at all. But then you were in Vietnam for a year. So you had a career then that really did span World War II through Vietnam, and you saw a lot of changes. What year were you in Vietnam?

Leo Borel: In '67. I got there New Years Day of '67 and left New Years Day '68.

What was your job while you were in Vietnam?

Leo Borel: Vietnam, I transferred into what's called air freight, which is pretty much down there.

Oh, there's a whole stack of photographs.

Leo Borel: Yeah, and I'm going to have to be leaving now.

Absolutely.

Leo Borel: That's the work I was doing.

Lots and lots of cargo and pallets and things of that sort.

Leo Borel: What we do is incoming planes come in and we'd break 'em there, incoming cargo, and redo it going to different parts of the country.

Is that you?

Leo Borel: No, I took over for him.

OK, that's great.

Leo Borel: There I am with a couple of the girls.

So you spent one year there and then how did you end up coming to live in Austin?

Leo Borel: Well, they shipped me from Vietnam to a little place called Wiesbaden, Germany, almost ¾ around the world. So I spent four years in Germany and then they sent me to a little place called Mountain Home Idaho Air Force Base. It was 10 miles from the town which wasn't much of a town. It was about 80 miles from Boise. There I had enough time in the service in there to retire and it was getting pretty hot for another tour of Vietnam, so I thought I would retire. So I retired in June of '73.

How did you come to Austin though?

Leo Borel: Well, I had a cousin. He was in charge of Scobie Moving & Storage, and he was down there. He told me I come in there, and he'd put me to work. So as soon as I got to come in here, I went to Moving & Storage to Scobie. He got transferred back to San Antonio, and so the guy told me he'd hire me anyway, so I started out working for a moving storage company and worked there for 8 years, and then went to Allied from there, and went to working for – oh, my mind's going again.

Oh that's fine, so you've been in Austin since '73 then, and worked in the moving business.

Leo Borel: Yeah, '73, and then I was working in the stock room and worked for making traffic lights. I think they were called, Seaman bought 'em out, but there used to belonged to a guy from Western Moving Company.

Well yes sir, I know you've got to go, but it's been an honor.

Leo Borel: This here, this is a little different now than in this one. This here, I had some extra copies.

Yes sir. I'll be sure to read this.

Leo Borel: If you got any more information, this is CD's, computer disks for this.

Yes sir, and we're going to be sending you a copy of this interview as well as a letter and a certificate from Commissioner Patterson.

Leo Borel: You can have both of these.

OK, sir, well thank you very much.

Leo Borel: Like I said, I was going to get more time, but -

Sure, I understand. That's a nice bulletin.

Leo Borel: We get that down there.

Well sir, we'll go ahead and wrap up the interview now but I really appreciate it and want to let you know that Commissioner Patterson and everybody here is very thankful for your service to our country.

Leo Borel: Well, I just done what I had to do, like everybody else.

Well it added up and we're thankful for it. Thank you very much.

[End of recording]